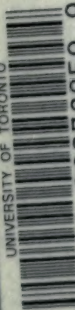


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The uses of poetry

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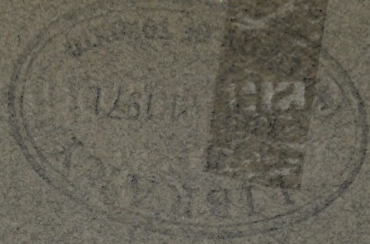
# The Uses of Poetry

By

A. C. Bradley

President, 1911

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## THE USES OF POETRY<sup>1</sup>

I MUST at once confess that my title, 'The Uses of Poetry,' is more or less deceptive. I intended to speak of that subject alone; but I found that I should only follow stumbling in the footprints of Sidney, Wordsworth, and Shelley if I attempted to describe the ways in which poetry enriches, purifies, and elevates life. At the same time I remembered, in more formal debates on poetry, so much confusion with respect to this notion of 'use', that I thought it would be more profitable, if much more dry, to endeavour to diminish it. And, even in that part of my address which really deals with one of the uses of poetry, my main object has still been the clarification of ideas.

When we ask of what use is poetry, we are regarding it solely as a means to an end. The question of its use or uses involves, therefore, the question of its end or ends; and on this much has been said both casually and in long discussions. We may find answers in the poets themselves. Pope's assertion that Shakespeare wrote 'for gain, not glory', might be taken to imply that a poet's choice is confined to these two ends. For Browning, on the other hand, his 'song' was his 'due to God', as, for Michael Angelo, the purpose of his art was the glory of God, and not of Michael Angelo. Keats confessed that he 'ever felt athirst for glory', but still he held that 'the great end of poetry' was to

be a friend  
To soothe the cares and lift the thoughts of man:

and that may be taken as a fair summary of the fuller statements of Wordsworth. Five aims have now been mentioned, and I will appeal to only one poet more. Burns declared that he had no aim at all:

Some rhyme a neighbour's name to lash;  
Some rhyme (vain thought!) for needfu' cash;  
Some rhyme to court the country clash,  
                    And raise a din;  
For me, an aim I never fash—  
                    I rhyme for fun.

On this and on the other testimony of the poets I may offer one remark. *All* poets rhyme for fun. What Burns meant by the phrase is explained by two lines in the preceding stanza:

Just now I've ta'en the fit o' rhyme,  
My barmie noddle's working prime.

*Every* poet, I say, when he is writing, writes because his noddle is barmie (yeasty); in other words, because something is working in his head and wants to be expressed. But that, as Burns saw, is the

<sup>1</sup> The Presidential address delivered at the Annual General Meeting on January 12 1912.

immediate cause of the writing ; it is not an aim. This aim, if the poet has one, is what he thinks of when he is *not* writing, and what perhaps incites him to make his noddle barmie when it would rather be at rest. And this aim, clearly, need not be the same in all poets, or always the same in one.

However, the writers of poetry have not helped us much, and we had better turn to the reader. The question now is, What is the use of poetry to him, or to what end in him does it, or ought it to, contribute ? And this is the question so much debated in criticism from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century. One common answer was pleasure, sometimes called also amusement. Another was moral improvement, or moral instruction with a view to improvement. There is an obvious objection to each doctrine. For the pleasure doctrine appears to group poetry with card-playing or drinking, while the improvement doctrine does not explain why poetry should be pleasant. Hence the more popular view (as old, of course, as Horace) was that poetry aims both at moral profit and at pleasure ; or, better still, that its immediate object is pleasure, under cover of which it gains its ultimate purpose of profit. This is the gospel of the sugared pill, a gospel which satisfies both conscience and common sense, since it recognizes that we ought to wish to be better and do wish to enjoy ourselves.

I do not mean to mock at these discussions, which contain valuable matter and evidently point to certain truths. But, for the most part, they deform those truths, and it would be hard to invent a formula more fatal to the understanding of poetry than the antithesis of amusement and instruction, or of pleasure and improvement. Besides, as the disputants rarely examine the ideas they employ, they commonly proceed on the strange assumption that an end cannot also be a means, nor a means be also an end. And so, treating pleasure or morality as the end of poetry, they forget that each is at the same time useful, i.e. a means—perhaps to poetry itself ; and, having taken poetry for a means, which of course it is, they unknowingly assume that it can be nothing else. Now I could not speak of the uses of poetry without continual and interrupting protests against this notion and its inevitable effects. For I believe that, though the value of poetry is much increased by its uses, it has a value of its own, which it would still possess if it were perfectly useless ; and, further, that its usefulness in contributing to ends beyond itself depends on its first fulfilling its primary purpose, which is nothing but itself. But this doctrine, I know, is open to misunderstanding and sounds paradoxical even to some of those who habitually act in accordance with it. And, therefore, I will begin by referring to certain obstacles which impede its acceptance and also produce confusion about the uses of poetry. This removal of obstacles is all I can attempt. I am not about to argue the case for the intrinsic value of poetry, and still less to try to exhibit the reason of its value. That could be done only by asking what it is in its nature that gives it such value ; and this question is far too large for our limits. I must add a word of apology to any one who knows what I have written on ‘ Poetry for Poetry’s sake ’, and who may hear some echoes in the first remarks I have to offer.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Any student of philosophy who may read this address will remember that it was not composed for him and does not aim either at thoroughness in treatment or strict

## I

If we wanted examples of intrinsic value in life, we should not look for them in things : we should all look, first of all, within. Affection ; the peace or aspiration of religion ; courage, generosity, or any other virtue ; these, or at any rate one or more of these, almost every one would say, are good in themselves, whatever further good they bring. Well, poetry, differing from all of them, resembles them all in one respect, its mode of existence : it is a process or activity of the mind or soul. But some people do not see this. I will not charge them with believing that poetry is a book, but they still imagine it as, somehow or other, a thing ; and so, since we usually regard things as means to an end, they stumble at the notion that poetry is an end. But that poetry exists only in a soul becomes obvious if we think of a poem which its author has never confided to another human being, and which is none the less a poem for that. Described very roughly, it is, first, a series of sounds. These, as part of the poem, are not vibrations of air ; they are *heard* sounds, and heard sounds exist only in acts of hearing ; while, if the poet does not utter them aloud, and so hear them, they exist only as, and when, he imagines them.<sup>1</sup> Next, these sounds, being words, are accompanied by, and signify, a connected series of images, figures, ideas, thoughts, all more or less emotional—what we call the substance or content of the poem. And this (however much it may resemble something beyond itself, something we call real), has its being only in acts of our poet's mind—acts, let us say for brevity's sake, of imagination. Of course, these acts with their contents are not on a par with the poet's casual fancies or his reflections, nor are the emotions that accompany them on a par with his headache or high spirits. They are firmly bound together into a distinct unified whole, held in memory and capable of frequent repetition ; and so they stand apart from, and may be contrasted with, his merely personal experience and what he might call himself, so that they possess, if we like to use the word, a kind of objectivity. Nevertheless, they with their contents are merely acts of his, and when he dies they (and therefore his poem) vanish from the earth. But suppose he has got the words printed first. Then there remains, certainly not the poem, but a set of material signs, instructing us how to recreate the poem by repeating the mental acts in which it existed. And, so far as we can do this, you will observe, we re-live in ourselves a section of the poet's life ; not 'the weariness, the fever, and the fret', the life where perhaps he was no better than ourselves, but the life of genius, in which he was greatly, if not immeasurably, our superior. There might surely be some intrinsic value in that.

Now take a further point. People imagine a poem as one fixed thing. But probably it never was so even to the poet, since the mental acts in which it existed were probably never quite the same in any two repetitions, being, as they were, imaginative and emotional, not mere logical acts. And certainly, now that he is dead, there are as many poems as readers, and the poem has varying degrees of existence.

accuracy in statement. I add this note because I fear that at several points ideas may be suggested which I should repudiate.

<sup>1</sup> In what follows, merely for the sake of simplicity, I ignore the perceived or imagined sounds.

For its readers cannot receive it, they must recreate it by their own acts ; and these must vary with their poetic capacity. And this holds, too, of every single reader ; for his poetic capacity fluctuates, and he probably exerts it, also, more and less in his various readings of the poem. Well, then, when I assert or deny the intrinsic value of poetry, what do I mean by that word ? Do I mean what I experience when the imaginative emotional acts, in which alone poetry can exist for me, are all-absorbing, and the most faithful to the original, and the most continuous and vivid, in my power ? Or do I mean such acts as I perform when I indolently read a feeble novel, and when even these acts are interrupted by remarks on the part of my critical self or my interesting companion ? In the latter case I may deny all intrinsic value to poetry (though even then I might well be wrong) ; but people would not deny it if only, when they came to theorize, they would recall their better experience.

I pass on to another obstacle, which may take the shape of an objection. 'Granted,' it may be said, 'that poetry is an activity of the soul, and that we are to take it at a high level, still it is but one activity, it is only a part of life, and its value therefore must lie not in itself but in its contribution to the whole. The intrinsic value lies there. Poetry was made for man, not man for poetry.' How is this objection to be met ? Premising that these ideas of part and whole may easily mislead, since they will not apply to the soul or life as they apply to outward things, from which we commonly derive them, I should answer thus. Poetry, beyond doubt, is but one activity of the soul, and it could have no value of any kind, because it could not exist, outside the whole soul. And, further, its value lies in its contribution to this whole. But that in no way shows that it is without intrinsic value and a mere means. It contributes to the whole in two ways. First, it is of service to other activities, e. g. the virtues, religion, philosophy : and, so far, it is a means. But, secondly, it contributes *itself*, and what it brings to the intrinsic value of the whole is its own intrinsic value : and here it is an end. It is agreed that the whole has such value ; but, being a soul or life, it has not really 'parts', but lives *in* its activities, and, except in them, is nothing. If then in each and all of them it is intrinsically worthless, it is so altogether ; and if it has intrinsic worth, that worth must lie, if not in all, at any rate in one or more of them. Of course, this does not prove that it lies in poetry in particular, but it shows that there is nothing in the argument that, because the value of poetry consists in its contribution to the whole, it cannot consist in itself. The fact, however, is that the metaphors contained in the words 'part' and 'contribution' mislead us. The whole here is indivisible ; and poetry, like religion or philosophy, *is* the whole in one special and irreplaceable attitude or expression.

But I shall be reminded that 'poetry was made for man, and not man for poetry'. Nothing darkens counsel like a sham antithesis. And the antithesis here is a sham, because there is no opposition whatever in the statements that poetry was made for man and that man was made for poetry. Poetry was made for man : that is, poetry is not the only activity that is an end in itself, and must not be treated as though it was. Man was made for poetry : that is, man without poetry is not all that man was made to be ; man as he should be includes poetry. If I said, 'Religion was made for man, and not



man for religion,' should I not be answered, 'Then what was he made for?'

In that last sentence I did not assert or imply that poetry and religion are *equal* in value. And this brings me to a last obstacle. Some people fancy that to claim for poetry intrinsic value is to claim for it a value equal, or even superior, to that of all other activities which possess such value; for instance, religion, or morality, or knowledge. But that is an illusion. The value of poetry might quite well be intrinsic and yet small. I should not argue about it if I thought it so; but the question of its rank among values is not before us, and I refer to it for a moment, in passing on, only in view of a question that comes later. Morality and poetry are both ends in themselves, but poetry is on one side inferior, because it does not belong in the same sense as morality to what we call real life. Hence it is not so indispensable. A soul or life without some virtue would not actually be a human soul or life at all. But, while the like may perhaps be said of a soul or life destitute of feeling for beauty in any shape, it is notorious that persons not merely respectable but worthy of respect regard metrical language, as others do music, with astonishment and disgust. And, unless we happen to have a spite against the word virtue or morality, most of us would admit that in human life poetry ought to be related to the thing so called like flowers twining round a tower. Yet, on the other hand, as the flowers are in one way superior to the tower, so there is something in the nature of poetry that seems to be superior to virtue: and perhaps, without describing it, I may suggest it in a figure. Life or the soul is imperfect. If you try to imagine it (as you cannot) grown to perfection, you find that some of its present activities must have disappeared as needless, or rather must have expanded into something higher than themselves. And among these will be the moral virtues; for they all imply imperfection, temptation, and the possibility of evil. But there seems no reason why poetry should so pass away, any more than music or love, though in some respects its character might change. Perhaps this is the unconscious reason why in the Golden Age of mythologies and poets, and in the heaven of prophets, the souls in bliss, who cannot well be courageous when they have nothing to fear, or bountiful when they own no property, sing songs. If so, I will venture to assert that, there, all the words are written by poets. And I wish they were so here.

And now I will go on—or at least will try to go on—to the uses of poetry.

## II

The theories which treated it as merely useful dealt, you will remember, with its contributions to pleasure and to morality; and this list, though far from complete, will be quite long enough for the time left to us.

That poetry is pleasant while it lasts, and issues in further pleasure by opening the eyes and heart to poetic beauty everywhere, might seem a fact too plain to bear comment. And yet the statement is open to objection. For many lovers of poetry dislike to hear the words pleasant and pleasure applied to it. In their minds these words are closely associated with what we call our 'pleasures' or amusements, and to use them of poetry seems to degrade it. Nor can it be denied

that in discussions on poetry they have been so used as to degrade it. Therefore, whether we share this objection or not, we ought, when we say that poetry is pleasant, to make our meaning clear; and I will try to say what I mean.

First, I mean simply that, if we divide all feelings, important and unimportant, into two broad classes, those of satisfaction and those of dissatisfaction, feelings acceptable or affirmative and feelings the reverse, the feeling that attends poetry belongs to the first class. This class includes stirrings so faint and dim as hardly to deserve the name of pleasure, and, at the other end, feelings of joy, delight, or rapture. 'Pleasure' is the customary name for this class, and to use it of poetry is not to imply that poetry may not give joy, delight, or rapture.

But pleasures do not differ only in intensity; and, when I say that poetry gives pleasure, I mean, in the second place, one particular satisfactory feeling, the pleasure or delight proper to poetry. This is not the pleasure proper to eating, golf-playing, music, or philosophy; and poetry is not the road, or at any rate not the straight road, to any of these pleasures or to any other except its own, which in its turn no other activity except poetry can afford. The pleasures of specific states or activities, though they resemble one another in various degrees, are one and all unique and irreplaceable by one another. Poetic pleasure resembles musical pleasure much more closely than the pleasure of golf-playing, but it is not either of them.

Thus understood, the statement that poetry gives pleasure seems to be free from offence. But perhaps it may still be open to doubt. It is pleasant to read the *Birds* or the *Tempest*, but it does sound odd to call the *Oedipus Rex* or *Othello* pleasant reading; and to substitute 'joyful' or 'blissful' would hardly mend the matter. Let us formulate our doubt. 'Much poetry,' we may say, 'is clearly pleasant, but a good deal no less clearly brings pain. You cannot really read a sad song without some sadness, or a tragedy without feelings still more painful. Nor can you dispose of these feelings by calling them unreal; for, though in a certain sense that is true, there they are, and they hurt. And not only are they there, but they are sometimes indispensable to the total effect (by which I do not mean only the final, and still less the subsequent effect) of the poem. In these cases their presence is by no means due to error in the poet or defect in the poem. And these cases are not rare. Indeed, not to speak of elegies and numberless lyrics, probably the majority of the most famous long poems belong to this class.' This is all true, and highly important, though it is often forgotten by those who praise poetry for the pleasure it gives, or praise it as though it were always the direct expression of some ideal. And yet, if the painful feelings excited by a poem were not in some way subordinated and made to contribute to a total effect of another kind; and if this total effect, however much of pain it may include, were one of dissatisfaction, one which we did not feel to be well worth having, or one which was acceptable only as the doing of a repulsive duty is preferable to its neglect, we should surely feel that something was wrong either with the poem or with our reading of it. That seems to me beyond doubt. And if it is true, it still appears that poetry, apart from defect, is, in the sense assigned to the word, pleasant. And, I may add, this result has significant bearings. If it is right, for example, those must be wrong who affirm that it is no fault in a poem

that its total effect should be one of dissatisfaction. On the contrary we must hold that this is a very serious fault, and that, from the point of view of poetry, it cannot be justified by the plea that it makes the poem true to certain facts or an incentive to virtue.

With these explanations we may return to the statement that poetry is pleasant. And, I think, we must add to it. This pleasantness does not seem to be an accidental attendant of poetry, but one so essential that without it poetry would hardly be itself. In reflective analysis, no doubt, we can clearly distinguish the two, but we cannot separate them in poetic experience, nor can we really imagine one without the other, as we can imagine the poetic activity without the pleasure of smoking tobacco or eating sweetmeats that may happen to accompany it. The inseparability of the pleasure from the activity is obvious; and that of the activity from its pleasantness, though not obvious, appears to be fact. But in that case it seems to follow that, in claiming for poetry an intrinsic value, we must not ignore its pleasantness, and, if we are speaking strictly, ought not to speak as if its intrinsic value were independent of that. With some other activities which have such value this perhaps does not hold. Virtue, religion, science or philosophy are normally attended by their own satisfactions, but it may be maintained that, deprived of them, these activities still remain themselves, and that their value, though lessened, is still there; and the man set on goodness or truth or union with God might passionately deny that it was even lessened by the loss of its joy. But, however that may be, with poetry, with the other fine arts, and generally with the perception or imagination of beauty, the case seems otherwise: the pleasantness of beauty seems to be a property inseparable and essential. And if this sounds like a paradox and even an absurdity, since it is notorious that we can read poetry without enjoying it, I answer that, to the best of my belief, I cannot. What happens when I seem to be doing so is either that I am not really *reading* poetry, or that it is not really *poetry* that I read. Either I fail to recreate in any perceptible degree a genuine poetic activity, or I actively recreate an activity which, to me, is not perceptibly poetic. And I venture to think that any lover of poetry who makes the experiment will find that, when he can truly say of any verses that they give him no pleasure, he must also say that to him they are mere verses.

The fact that poetry is thus essentially pleasant explains why it is natural to say loosely that we read it for pleasure, that it has got to please, and even that pleasure is its end. And these expressions are harmless when they are loosely understood. But, taken as accurately true, they become both false and dangerous. For not only do they speak of pleasure, when they mean, or should mean, poetic pleasure, but they imply that this pleasure is separable from the activity on which it attends, and further that the value lies in the pleasure alone, while the poetry is nothing but a means to it. Now that position is both psychologically and logically untenable; for if it is doubtful whether the poetry can exist without the pleasure, it is quite certain that the pleasure cannot exist without the poetry; and if it is questionable whether we can ascribe the value to the poetry alone, it is merely arbitrary to ascribe it to the pleasure alone, which owes its whole character to the poetry. And if we take the doctrine as an account of our poetic experience, it is glaringly untrue. For though,

in really reading poetry, our feeling of pleasure is involved, we certainly do not seek it, we have not our eye on it at all, nor in any way on ourselves, not even on our activity as such. We absorb ourselves in the emotional sounds, images, thoughts, and the like. We surrender ourselves to them. And if we will not do so we miss both them and the pleasure that attends them. Nor is there anything peculiar about poetry in this respect. If a man playing a stroke at golf were to think of his pleasure in the stroke, he would be almost sure to play a bad one, and so get pain. Even in a game you must lose your soul to gain it; and it is a truism that to treat everything as a means to your pleasure is the way to be bored by everything.

Here we might leave this question of the pleasure of poetry. And yet I cannot leave it here. I confess to a dislike, which I believe is not irrational, for the use of the word pleasure. We may explain what we mean by it, but none the less it will continue to tempt us into false ideas about poetry—the idea that it shrinks from the hardest and most fruitful part of human experience and tries to ‘make things pleasant’; the idea that it is a means to a general agreeable feeling, the value of which it would be absurd to question; the idea that it is on a par with our ‘pleasures’ or amusements. Why, let me ask, do we object to this last notion? It suggests what is true, that, if necessary, we could live without poetry, and that, for most of us, it does not belong to our work but to our hours of leisure. Shall we say then that this notion conceals the fact that, while our amusements are mere means—recreations or restorations of ourselves, which send us back refreshed to our work—poetry is an end in itself? I hesitate to put the difference thus, because, it seems to me, an amusement, though more means than end, may still have, and indeed ought to have, some intrinsic value. Even a game may be played, and should be played, in part for its own sake. We may dispose of this difficulty by replying that in that case it is no longer a *mere* amusement; but it seems better to admit that an amusement may have intrinsic value, and to insist on the poverty of its value as compared with that of poetry. Poetry is worth much more than golf because, as we might say, there is so much more in it. If we take what we loosely call ourselves, our average selves, we go down from them to golf, and use but little of them in it; but we go up from them to poetry, and become there something much fuller and deeper than they. We become what, in comparison with them, is our ideal self, the self we touch and fall away from. Hence we may rightly speak of poetry in language like that of religion, as above us, descending to us, or revealing itself to us, and of ourselves as worshippers longing for union with it and desiring whatever pain that union may require. And so there may be times when, sunk even lower than our average self, we hear the summons of poetry with the sluggard’s reluctance or even the sinner’s fear. But of all this the word pleasure suggests less than nothing.

All this time, as I hope you have observed, I have said next to nothing of the use of poetry; for I have been speaking of the pleasure attending it, not of the pleasure it may lead to. But even that may be said to lie in poetry itself, if we extend the meaning of the word. Poetry, we said, when it is over, leaves us with eyes and hearts open to poetic beauty everywhere. It has helped us, that is to say, not indeed to hear verses pouring out of everything, but to hear everywhere the still

inarticulate voice which in poetry proper becomes musical language. But it is too late to dwell on this use of poetry. Morality is waiting for us. And in coming to it I will not play the cheat and insist that poetry *is* morality, though it certainly is, in so far as the will is concerned in it. I will really try at last to regard it as a means.

### III

Does poetry on the whole conduce to moral goodness? And, if so, how comes it that some of its particular friends, and some of the particular friends of morality, appear to agree in thinking that these two, with their characteristic ways of regarding life, are not only different but in some measure hostile?

In considering these questions we ought at once to face certain facts. And one of them is that immoral poetry does exist. There are poems which, one cannot doubt, had their origin partly in immoral feelings, others which were addressed in part to such feelings in the patron or the public—feelings of common sensuality, envy, spite, and the like. We may fancy their number to be very small if we remember only the poetry of the last century and a half; and yet within that limit many accusations of immorality have been made, and they are not all unjust. For example, I should call *Don Juan* not indeed an immoral, but a tainted poem. I do not refer to the story of Juan and Haidee, which seems to me purely poetic, nor to cantos or stanzas where the spirit of satire or comedy is large and triumphant, as it is in that splendid work the *Vision of Judgment*. But elsewhere there *are* appeals to such feelings as I mentioned, and frequently the spirit of the poem becomes small and even mean; and this last immorality (for such it is) is the reason why, for all its brilliance, one cannot read *Don Juan* long without weariness or depression, as one can the satire of Dryden or Pope. Well, this is but an illustration, and, many will think, a bad one; but, if they review all the poetry that they know, of various ages and countries, they will have no difficulty in finding plenty of others. And, for our present purpose, it will hardly do to answer that the immoral in poetry is also the unpoetic, and that unmixed poetry cannot be immoral. That may be true and important, but the question before us is about poetry in a looser sense, about literature in verse which has merit enough to be remembered.

Then, in the second place, a good deal of poetry that is not immoral still does harm, because a reader takes it more or less falsely and so *makes* it immoral. I am not speaking of the educated garbage-hunter, but of the partially incompetent lover of poetry. A genuinely poetic treatment of passion may become to him a practical incentive, and is not less likely to do so if he is in the habit of searching in a poem for its moral. Or perhaps his sense of the ridiculous is defective; and so, when he meets with a comic handling of obscenity—a source of mirth frequent in poetry until quite recently—he cannot laugh and pass on free, but he either enjoys what to him is mere foulness or he shuts his mind with a snap: and the first course must be immoral, and the second may be, for it may be cowardice. And again, there are readers who tend to pervert all pathos into sentimentality, which is never very far from moral weakness. These are only examples

of the many ways in which poetry which ought to be harmless does harm. There are probably few men fond of poetry who have not, in their youth at least, got some injury from it ; and it is either blindness or want of candour, in those who rightly defend the freedom of poetry and other arts, to deny or ignore its dangers.

Poetry, then, by its own fault or the reader's, does harm. But this does not help us to answer our question. For unfortunately everything and everybody in the world does harm. If you want to do none, you must do nothing ; and *then* you will do harm. The only reasonable question is whether poetry does more of moral harm or of moral good ; and I cannot think that anybody capable of quiet thought would hesitate about the answer if only he remembered what morality is. I do not mean that we go wrong because we are not philosophers. I mean that, when we come to controversial questions like this, we are apt to forget the plain facts of every day, so that in theorizing we use a notion of morality which is a mere travesty of our living and working belief. And this too is the main source of the quarrel between the champions of poetry and other arts and the champions of morality. Doubtless on both sides there are a few whose real beliefs are very narrow or perverse ; but the rest are substantially at one, and nine-tenths of their controversy is a beating of the air, because the morality of which both sides talk is not the morality in which either believes.

How does the champion of morality create his false idea of it ? First, he imagines moral laws to be merely prohibitions, moral conduct to consist of abstentions, and goodness to be the absence of evil. This whole notion is negative. And, next, he imagines these prohibitions, abstentions, and negations to concern primarily, or even exclusively, one natural impulse or perhaps two. Thus the phrases 'a moral man' and 'an immoral man' become for him equivalent respectively to a man who is, and a man who is not, duly abstinent or negative in respect of the sexual impulse and, perhaps, the appetite for intoxicating drink. And when he says that poetry conflicts with morality, he means that it is too lenient, or is even encouraging, towards these impulses ; but he does not mean that it is too lenient towards cruelty or hypocrisy or cowardice or any other vice in the world except two, for when he is in the controversy he thinks of nothing but them. But, if he turned to his daily life and his operative moral beliefs, what would he find ? There certainly he still regards moral laws as on one side prohibitive ; but he regards them also, and much more, as commands to be and do something positive ; and, if he is wise, he does not admire even sobriety and chastity because they are mere absences of evil, but because they are active energies pouring into productive channels the physical and spiritual force which else would run to waste and mischief. And the man he calls good, and likes and respects, is not merely sober and chaste, but brave, just, generous, helpful, sincere, courteous and considerate, public-spirited and diligent in his calling. These are but a few of the virtues, but they, and any others you may add, are again active living powers ; and all these, and the actions that flow from them, are the morality the man really believes in, not the scarecrow he sets up and pretends to worship, and vilifies the artist because he will not worship it.

But, if he thus wrongs himself and morality and art all alike, so

equally does the artist or the friend of any art, if he accepts this scarecrow for fact, or makes one like it for himself, and then begins to tilt at morality as a species of puritanical or philistine convention, or possibly to vapour about immoralism. All the time he blasphemes morality he loves it just as much as his opponent; for he loves courage and generosity and the rest, and hates cruelty and meanness and doubleness. And he is living by morality: for, not to speak of his other virtues, his devotion to his work and his ideal, and his refusal to be seduced from it by pleasure or indolence or the desire for applause, are morality and nothing else. I do not say that he does not differ at all from his antagonist; but probably they differ only, as any other two men may, in regard to the relative importance of this virtue or vice and of that, and perhaps in the different names they happen to use for the same thing. Yet, by identifying morality with its beggarly elements, he is helping to degrade it and to confuse the public mind as well as his own. And if he pleads that he only copies his opponent, let Fluellen answer him: 'If the enemy is an ass and a fool and a prating coxcomb, is it meet, think you, that we should also, look you, be an ass and a fool and a prating coxcomb? in your own conscience, now?' Besides, he is the last man who has a right to be stupid, for his business is to imagine; and, I may add, the last man who has a right to be immoral, for all immorality is want of imagination.

If now we understand by morality the thing we really believe in, our question whether, on the whole, poetry conduces to it almost answers itself. We have but to think of the qualities and actions we approve, and to ask whether their lustre is heightened or is dimmed in the poetry that we know, and whether the qualities and actions we condemn look less ugly and less disastrous in poetry than in our common experience. A doubt, I think, may reasonably be felt, though I do not feel it, in the case of the so-called negative virtues which relate to impulses of sense, especially in view of the frequent incompetence of readers; but we can surely feel none as to the whole body of morality, and if we do we shall hardly be convinced by argument. I will leave this question, therefore, here, and turn to another side of the matter. For, though the moral and poetic ways of regarding life are in harmony on the whole, they are specifically different ways; and it is worth while to consider one of their points of difference, because this may explain what here and there gives rise to the appearance of conflict.

Morality belongs to what we call real life, and is directly concerned with it, and especially with conduct or practice. Reality is a process of change, and we consider these changes as forming a single unbroken series of events, in which anything we call real must occupy a place. But poetry does not belong to that series. Of course our acts of poetic imagination do, but I mean by poetry here the contents of these acts, or what is expressed in poetry. This, no doubt, has a bearing on real life and may resemble it. It is perhaps the essence of that life, and this essence may be expressed in poetry more clearly and completely than by life itself; but it is not a piece of life, a section with a fixed duration and date in the single series we call real. It inhabits a world of its own, an eternal world, not before and after ours but apart from it, the world where the nightingale lives who was not born for death, and the boughs that do not shed their leaves, and the happy love that

is for ever panting and for ever young. Everything without exception that is in poetry is in that world : not only the imaginary Ancient Mariner, but equally the beings and actions and feelings contained in poems which had their origin in real facts. Tennyson's lyric, 'Break, break, break,' owed its existence to the death of Arthur Hallam ; but what it says, what is *in* it, has no reference to him ; is to us, as poetry, precisely what it is to those who never heard of him or even of Tennyson ; and might even be said, in temporal language, to be something that existed thousands of years before either of them and will exist thousands of years hence. The real Brutus lived for a limited time in the real series, and at a date separated by precise distances from other dates, e.g. to-day : but the Brutus in Shakespeare's drama is not in the same chronology as the real Brutus ; and, if you try to put him there by dating him at the time when readers are imagining him, you find that he has probably killed Caesar several million times, and has repeatedly killed him years before he plotted to do so, and years after he killed himself ; and these things do not happen in real life. He is not there, and never was : he is eternal.

This fact, that the content of poetry is outside real life, is indicated in another way by the old unfortunate description of poetry as an amusement, and by Schiller's formula, which proved much more fruitful, that poetry, like all art, is a kind of play or game, and not what we call real earnest. However serious its content may be, however intently we are absorbed in it, however keenly it makes us feel, we never dream that it and its events belong to the same order of existence as the clock that ticks while we read, and we dismiss the agony of Lear in a moment if the kitten goes and burns its nose. The very essence of reality is expressed in Lear's pain, but in an unreal shape. The kitten's pain expresses very little of that essence, but it is real. And so we can comfort the kitten and have a moral obligation to it, but cannot have one to Lear.

I am afraid you will think I am forcing an open door. But unluckily many friends of poetry, feeling its greatness, do not like to admit that it is, in the sense explained, unreal or a show. And yet its greatness, its freedom, its power to show more than real life can, depend on its being unreal. And so does the particular difference between it and morality to which I have been leading up. Morality, dealing with real conduct, surveys a given act or situation, and determines, easily or otherwise, that as a whole it is good or bad. And, though the good thing may involve loss and pain and even some morally bad results, and though the bad thing contains elements which, in themselves or under other conditions, would be good, all that, for moral practice, is irrelevant. The thing has got to exist or be done as a whole, and here and now under *these* conditions ; and, if as a whole it is good or bad, there is an end of the matter, and, for moral purposes, it is absolutely good or bad. But poetry is not tied down in this manner. It does not deal with something to be done, or with anything here and now. Advice and judgement are not its business. When therefore it expresses fully a passing mood or intense emotion it is saying nothing of the value, or proper place, or effects, of this mood or emotion in life ; and, after reading the *Stanzas written in Dejection near Naples*, we do not exclaim, 'Oh, but Shelley should make an effort.' Or, again, poetry can emphasize a single aspect of a thing, or emphasize



equally both sides of it, without implying that the whole thing is desirable or justifiable in life, or that its own emphasis coincides with that of practical morality. For it does not profess to supply a valuation; and, if it suggests one to us, then that is not a merely moral valuation. Take, for example, *The Jolly Beggars* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. If the moralist (which means we as moral beings) witnessed in real life the scene portrayed in *The Jolly Beggars*, probably he would judge that on the whole it was bad and had better disappear. What the poet as a man might have said on this head is irrelevant. The poem offers no opinion on it at all; but, while it exhibits unembellished what the moralist condemns in the persons and manners of the beggars, its emphasis falls elsewhere and it leaves an overpowering impression of their freedom from care, and indeed of their victory over all the ills of life. If Shakespeare the man had been Antony's friend, no doubt he would have urged him to break with Cleopatra, and, in doing so, would have taken pains not to talk poetry about her or her lover's passion and all it gave him. But the poet Shakespeare had not to advise but to show; and he shows the whole fact, an utter ruin, but a vast ruin bathed in glory. And in both cases, we must surely say, the poetic view, though it does not contradict the moral view, goes beyond it, shows more than it shows, and, one may add, shows something that we not only do want to see but ought to want to see. And this it does because it is free from the needs and limitations of real life and practice.

Now a puritan moralist might answer that it is just that glory and that freedom from care that ought not to be shown, and that these two poems are good examples of the immorality of poetry, for they invite him to imitate the Jolly Beggars and Antony. And perhaps, on account of this same invitation, both poems might be praised by some immoralist anxious to develop freely his 'individuality' (which is a whole syllable longer than Mesopotamia). But we have seen already that innocent poetry may do harm through the incompetence of readers who drag it out of its own sphere into the world of practice. One might invite the moralist to carry out his principle and see where it leads. The soul of Lear was purged in the furnace: therefore the tragedy invites me to heat the furnace for my aged parent. An immoral tragedy! A really moral one, duly intent on pointing out the effects of evil, would have shown how the cruelty of his daughters turned Lear into a monster worse even than themselves: and perhaps that change, by getting rid of the purification of Lear, would also suit the immoralist. Or one might perhaps appeal seriously to our puritan, and ask him whether he really means to deny that there is 'some soul of goodness in things evil', and whether, in condemning the poetry that shows this, he is not on the way to condemn something else. For, if a view that suffices for moral practice gives us the whole and final truth, a religious view, no less than a poetic one, must give us what is not that truth. Religion differs from poetry in its method, and besides, like morality, it deals with practice and real life; but then, in doing so, it denies that real life, as morality has to take it, is the whole and final truth; and this is just what poetry, which asserts nothing, nevertheless suggests. And religion pushes much further than poetry that truth about a soul of goodness, pushes it sometimes into assertions

which the puritan, if he understood his own view, would be bound to call immoral. And though, like morality, it approves this action or quality and condemns that, it bids us stop there and lay our hand upon our lips, for we have not the knowledge to judge the souls of men, or fathom the meaning that moves in life and beyond it. A great tragedy does not say that ; but that is just what it makes us feel.

To say that religion and poetry in their various ways go beyond morality is not to bring a charge against it. It would be perfectly justified if, within the limits of its own sphere, it refused to take any notice of these further intimations and asserted its absoluteness. Its business is with action in the life that we can see, and its own light suffices for it. The clearer its own light becomes, the better its business is done ; but another kind of light would not only be useless for its business, but might dazzle and confuse it. Nor does it conflict with that which goes beyond it (unless indeed it narrows or perverts itself). For neither religion nor poetry denies that we are bound to act, or that, judged from the position we must assume in acting, life is what morality judges it to be : they only say or hint that it is something more. And this is no remote or abstruse doctrine. It is in effect what every man with any poetry or religion in him is constantly repeating to himself, while none the less he continues emphatically to approve and condemn, to further this and resist that, and knows that the duty to do so is absolute.

For (to bring this much too rapid treatment of the subject to an end) he, this man, is both morality and poetry. Because they are powers at work in other souls and not only in our own, and powers immeasurably greater than any single soul, we imagine them as two separate beings somewhere outside souls, which can embrace like lovers or fight like boxers ; and in controversy about them they seem constantly to do the latter. But in every man they are two powers or activities of his single soul ; and if he would study them there, where he can feel them both, and himself in both ; if he observed how, when he is not personally and practically concerned, he regards much of real life from the non-moral point of view of poetry, and how morality in him makes not the least objection ; how each of these two powers is continually giving place to the other in the foreground of his mind without a sign of ill-will ; and how any attempt to make one the servant of the other would be an effort to mutilate himself ; then, I do not say he would master their natures, for I am sure I have not, but he would learn much more of them than he can from the controversy about them, which owes its being mainly to the unconscious manufacture of fictions, and the wish, common in theory and almost unknown in life, to force one power of the soul to do the work of all.





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